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SCIFOPSI
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SCIENZE DELLA FORMAZIONE
E PSICOLOGIA

Review written by Vanna Boffo

European Commission, *Adult and Continuing Education in Europe. Using Public Policy to Secure a Growth in Skills*, European Union, Luxembourg, 2013. Report written by Paolo Federighi.

It always seems very interesting to read the conclusions of research setting out solutions to some of the most important and serious problems of European and Western society, but it is even more so if we can actually touch these solutions hands on. This is the case of the book commissioned by the European Commission from Paolo Federighi about the present-day state of the art of Adult and Continuing Education in Europe. Paolo Federighi is currently professor of Adult Education and Head of the Department of Education and Psychology at the University of Florence, but before that he worked for many years in international organizations on public policies for education and training. In this sense, the book sets out the conclusions of long-term work. Indeed the publication “is a review of the findings of several EU-funded research projects under the 6th and 7th Framework Programmes for Research” (p. 7). But it is a wider text, because it comes after a lot of time spent understanding and building up research on adult learning and education.

The report has two principal aims: 1) to “propose a number of policy priorities to support adult and continuing education” in Europe (ibidem); 2) “to harvest the potential of existing scientific production [...] for guiding policy-makers in developing policy interventions which both support the growth of adult and continuing education and exploit the wealth of research and research tools available” (ibidem). Over and above these two aims, we find a third important aim: to fix the role of adult education through which the sector of studies and policies can contribute to employability and economic growth, on one hand, and respond to the social and cultural challenges of our time, such as social cohesion, educational exclusion and the economic crisis, on the other.

The different levels of participation of adults aged 25-64 in education and training (period: 2011) reflect the different levels of participation in the labour market. There is a correlation between the development of economic growth in some countries over the years 2000, 2005 and 2010 and the better performances of these countries. This is because the new young generation have invested a lot more in up-skilling than their predecessors. Where this has been the case, there have been significant results in term of economic growth and improved social conditions (pp. 26-27). In this sense, we may see how, with and in a pedagogical approach, adult education observes and reads the problems and lives of people aged 16 and above: making a critical review using tools from the economic and sociological fields within a large, expansive vision of society, the report shows us the strength of adult learning and education

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We can read the report at two different levels: the first as a political tool, the second as a pedagogical instrument. Without any doubt, the first type of reading moves from the situation of economic growth in the European countries: what contribution is given by adult learning and education? What type of role has adult and continuing education had in the growth of the European people? The second reading, however, is an immediately pedagogical view: social cohesion and social inclusion are very important, and it is important to think of adult and continuing education as the context where it is possible to increase the learning level of low-skilled workers and young people, and to create the necessity to build on knowledge for a better life.

The methodology of the report is based on evidence stemming from the research, as said above, carried out in the Sixth and Seventh Framework Programmes, in particular Lifelong Learning 2010 “Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: the Contribution of the Education System” and “Lifelong Learning, Innovation, Growth and Human Capital: Tracks in Europe” and the research by Cedefop, Eurofond, Eurostat and the OECD. The evidence-based method not only results from the author’s revision of research reports, but also from his particular outlook towards the problems and their solutions.

The evidence from the research affirms the overviews on the three main objectives as public policy aims: 1) to guarantee the necessary skills supply for economic growth; 2) “to correct the failings of initial education and training; 3) to support the dynamics of cohesion and social inclusion” (p. 10). Hence, the book develops from these starting points. From vocational education and training (Chapter 1), the problem of low-skilled people is put in correlation with adult education because it is important to expand participation in education in order to increase skills and competences and achieve social cohesion and fewer differences among the social classes (Chapter 2). Work and on-the-job learning are crucial in changing the balance of all societies and, above all, encouraging the lower classes to grow through the workplace (Chapter 3). In the same way, innovation can be considered the result of learning processes (Chapter 4) inside the workplace: “Innovation – orientated learning actions – that have a direct impact on the growth of capacities of organisations and individuals to be innovative – are the primary object of public and private policies for adult and continuing education in supporting innovation” (p. 52). The last chapter makes a virtual correspondence between the relationship among the markets as the economic dimension of society, and adult education, especially continuing vocational training, as the human dimension of not just European but Western society: a relationship presenting a very big challenge (Chapter 4).

In the last part, the book draws a map for governments in which it is possible to see the reasons for the importance of adult and continuing education and to

understand the necessity of training and learning in the workplace as characteristics for the growth of Europe's human potential.

The demand for adult and continuing education in Europe grew between 2007 and 2011: this fact happened while the crisis was in full swing. The general trend concerned both low- and highly-skilled workers. There are a large number of providers present in the workplace; in this sense this is the best place for adult education and training to take place. At present, it is companies and the family that take the lead in these interventions. The state and governments are making either very few or no investments in this sector. Till now, adult training has been central in the growth of society and the country, but "the factor that more than others determines the likelihood of accessing learning opportunities is the city, the region and the country of residence" (p. 87). This confirms the state's potential role. There are two lines for policy to increase the skills supply: on one hand, "policy would understand and increase the human potential present in Europe" because the skills possessed by the active population have an impact on companies and on society through the capacity for innovation. On the other hand, policy should be interested in low-skilled workers because in Europe we have a high number of this category of people.

On the part of policy priorities, the report fixes some points on the demand front: to "concentrate public interventions on adopting rules that reduce economic and social barriers that hamper access to training opportunities [...]; concentrate the use of public financial resources on rebalancing functions [...]; take on as a priority the reduction of the number of low-skilled citizens [...]; use direct incentives to encourage investment in training [...]" (p. 87). In terms of supply: to "use regulative and financial instruments to promote autonomous initiative for increasing the training potential of companies; promote expansion of the training market by reducing obstacles [...]; promote the presence of all sizes of training provider [...]; promote improvement of offer quality, making the university system assume duties of initial training of the sector operators and sustaining research oriented to training innovation" (p. 88).

At the end, some indications on the research priorities for the policies in adult and learning education guide governments in their future strategic developments, including "orientating the adult and continuing education market, developing learning potential and innovation ability in workplaces, guaranteeing the pertinence of learning opportunities with respect to the demand for skills, expanding the effectiveness of learning actions" (pp. 89-90). The report is unique in the literature on adult education and, with and through evidence-based data, it shows the close link between economy and pedagogy, and how to use both to make concrete suggestions to the politicians and technicians who have to make the decisions to boost well-being in Europe.